Managing Heritage, Making Peace: History, Identity and Memory in Contemporary Kenya

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We are coming to our Mother
who bore us in her flank

From the prairie and the backwoods,
from the shop and mill and bank.

From the orchard and the of

be the battle brief or long.

We are coming, Mother England,

five hundred thousand strong!

Britain, as the Mother Country, is extremely fortunate in her eldest daughter.

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Managing Heritage, Making Peace: History, Identity and Memory in Contemporary Kenya
Annie E. Coombes, Lotte Hughes and Karega- Munene

This is an important book on a subject vital to the development of a common citizenship in all post-conflict states, not just in Africa. The big questions that the book tackles are the three closely connected and often contradictory relationships between ‘cultural heritage’ and history, between local memory and national citizenship, and between hybrid ethnicity and international pressures to preserve authenticity, too easily transmuted into autochthony, hybridity’s opponent. Difficult enough to discuss in principle, these questions are still more of a challenge to observe in practice. What makes this book important is the first-hand, personally experienced evidence it marshals about the convenient myths, genuine beliefs, fearful claims, courageous generous and cynical opportunistisms of real lives. ‘Heritage’ can be a deeply desired protection where the state is not trusted and memories of inter-ethnic violence are raw; it can also be artfully designed to catch the eye and open the purse-strings of international tourism.

The three authors have observed sites of local and national memory in Kenya, they have talked with local activists about the management and purposes of local museums, they have listened in to those international organisations that seek to protect local cultures and environments, they have questioned the timid incoherence of the national story as told by Nairobi’s National Museum, they have read the archives, the combative Kenyan press and Kenya’s Hansard. They know of what they write.
Karega-Munene, of Nairobi’s United States International University and former chief archaeologist at the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), analyses the history of the formal institutions devoted to the preservation and explanation of Kenya’s heritage. Annie Coombes of London’s Birkbeck College, known for her work on public memory in post-apartheid South Africa, focuses on the divergent means and ends of memorialising Mau Mau. Lotte Hughes of Britain’s Open University and historian of the ‘Maasai moves’ in early colonial Kenya offers both a close-up study of the different local, national and international aspects of the conservation of a ‘sacred forest’ and an account of how national history has embarrassed the NMK.

These complementary perspectives hang together well. In all, they make clear the intrinsic oppositions between local efforts to make peace with violent pasts on the one hand and, on the other, the official memorialisation of nationalist struggle. Kenya’s national politicians have found it easier to sidestep this problem rather than to foster a history that encourages citizens to work through their memories of sometimes lethal difference and thereby enlarge their collective ability to defend their democratic rights.

Karega-Munene shows that post-colonial Kenya’s museum culture, like that of colonial Kenya, is more comfortable with pre-history than with history. There is of course much pre-history to celebrate, safely insulated by millennia from current controversy—thanks largely to the Leakey family. But it does not catch the modern Kenyan imagination. Today’s Kenyans are more concerned with how to avoid the inter-ethnic violence, politically inspired, that has marked too many general elections since the early 1990s. It was this local fear of political manipulation that energised the shoestring Community Peace Museum (CPM) initiative of nearly 20 years ago, led by Dr Sultan Somjee, then the NMK’s ethnographer. With his help local communities reawakened neglected habits of passing knowledge from one generation to the next and in so doing remembered and used their often shared, cross-ethnic traditions of conflict resolution and peacemaking. Doctor Somjee’s trained assistants facilitated the field research that underpins this book, even as some CPMs have now fallen into disuse for want of funds.

Divided memories of Mau Mau inevitably dominate the book’s case studies. It is encouraging that the worst atrocity of the Mau Mau war or ‘emergency’, the double massacre at Lari in early 1953 (Mau Mau onslaught and ‘loyalist’ reprisal), seems to have inspired the most conciliatory of all Kenya’s CPMs. Both sides, Mau Mau and ‘loyalist’, uniquely in Kikuyuland, are involved in the management of the Lari Memorial Peace Museum, as both sides suffered. The Lari museum is, unfortunately, equally unusual in displaying artefacts used in peacemaking rituals from other ethnic groups. It seems that these attempts to complicate a heroic narrative of Mau Mau nationalism are too inclusive to be followed by others, some of whom object that unresolved injustice stands in the way of any such reconciliation.

The second Kikuyu case study, that of the environmental protection of the Karima forest near Othaya, prompts reflection on other possible relations between local division and wider simplicities, with each set of seemingly cooperative protagonists using the other for their own divergent purposes. The local population was keen to defend local environmental assets against commercial degradation, their leading activist to promote the forest’s supposedly heroic connection with Mau Mau, and his international allies to plead for an indigenous people’s green virtues, all appealing to different histories of doubtful recent construction. Yet, without the documented evidence of a global orga-
sation’s misunderstandings, the Karima story might never have been made more widely known.

Another chapter considers the politics of the statue of Dedan Kimathi, the dread-locked Mau Mau field marshal immortalised in bronze outside Nairobi’s Hilton Hotel, ‘the unimpeachable individual signifying national achievement ... the striding figure atop a plinth’ (p. 176). In separate chapters Coombes and Hughes ruminate on the queasy evasions of history that such monumental memory entails. They say nothing of the flaws in Kimathi’s autocratic leadership that led to his capture by the British in the first place, or of the doubts and divisions to which he admitted at his trial. Other difficulties are quite enough for their analytical purpose. As they point out, a reading of Kenya’s history that attributes the country’s independence to Mau Mau alone, as the statue suggests, not only forgets the insurgents’ military defeat, but also turns Kikuyu ‘loyalists’ (whose sons are the core of Kenya’s ruling class) into traitors, and excludes non-Kikuyu from the national story. One can only sympathise, therefore, with the NMK’s delay in mounting an exhibition that purports to tell the ‘story of Kenya’, a record of indecision and silence well told here. The authors conclude that ordinary Kenyans are wiser than their politicians and their international environmental lobbyists in acknowledging the immigrant hybridity of their various ethnic identities. To memorialise mongrels is harder than building monuments to heroes but, as our authors suggest, it might be a surer means to build a nation reconciled to its divided past.

Keen-eyed readers will notice that this reviewer is among the many thanked in the acknowledgements; he had enjoyed reading well-worked drafts that evoked little comment.

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Pakistan: A New History
Ian Talbot

Ian Talbot is no stranger to writing about Pakistan. This book, the third edition of his original study first published in 1998, *Pakistan, A Modern History*, marks the continuation of a long-standing commitment both as an academic and as a field researcher to understanding Pakistan in all its complexities and fascination.

Taking both a thematic and chronological approach, Professor Talbot reminds us that the determining factor of Pakistan’s history is its location. Citing retired army officer Ralph Peters’s 2006 notion, the author explains how Pakistan’s ‘sensitive geo-political situation to the east of the Persian Gulf and in close proximity to Russia, China and India’ has made the country into a ‘garrison state’ in which the role of the armed forces has become ‘over-developed’ (p. 15).

What follows is a sound but gloomy analysis of how Pakistan’s domestic history has been influenced by its continual quest for stability, the division between phases falling neatly within the decades of its nearly 67 year existence: the ‘first experiment’ (p. 47)